

TOM CLANCY PRESSURE DEPTH

Prologue

Motor Vessel *Meridian Star*

13.10 degrees North Latitude

144.45 degrees East Longitude

Captain Arjun Devendra stood on the bridge of the classic Panamax vessel and looked out across hundreds of shipping containers stacked in neat rows on the deck. His ship, the *Meridian Star*, was of an older Panamax class that was designed to fit within the original locks of the Panama Canal. Not that it mattered much. Meridian Lines Private Limited kept his ship confined to shorter passages and saved the longer routes for Neo Panamax vessels that could carry more than three times the cargo.

Still, four thousand TEU, or Twenty-foot Equivalent Unit, was nothing to sneeze at.

Lars Jensen, his Danish Chief Mate, stood next to him in respectful silence for several seconds before politely clearing his throat.

Arjun turned to the younger man, who had sandy blond hair, a short beard, and studied him with piercing blue eyes. “You have the updated brief?”

“Yes, Captain.”

Arjun nodded his consent to continue.

“We’re clear of Guam and on course south-southwest toward Jakarta. Ops has us running the Philippine Sea, down past Sulawesi, and through the Makassar Strait. Our estimated time of arrival is ten days if we remain at standard service speed. Currents will be against us through the straits, so they want us to build a little buffer early.”

So far, there was nothing Lars had said that Arjun hadn't already taken into consideration. In his mid-50s, Arjun Devendra was an accomplished mariner. He had risen through the ranks as a merchant marine, first as a cadet with the Shipping Corporation of India, then as a seaman aboard private carriers during the global container boom. After Meridian Lines recruited him for his reputation in handling difficult waters, he transferred his license to Singapore. But the difficult waters of Southeast Asia had become his personal playground for nearly three decades, and he felt completely at ease there.

Arjun took a sip of his kopi with condensed milk and gestured for his chief mate to continue.

"Weather's a mixed bag. The monsoon flow is heavy over the Java Sea with lots of squalls predicted, winds gusting up to thirty knots in patches, and garbage visibility within the rain bands."

Arjun nodded. "Plenty of time before that becomes a factor. What else?"

"There's a low-pressure cell off Borneo that might not develop but will make for a sloppy ride."

Even more so with such a light load, Arjun thought.

When he didn't respond, Lars continued. "This leg will be our greatest security risk as we pass close to piracy-prone waters around Sulawesi and the Celebes Sea. Ops advises we run a continuous watch during that stretch with deck lights on and hoses rigged."

"AIS?" Arjun asked, testing the young officer.

"I recommend we keep the Automatic Identification System active but broadcast on restricted detail through Makassar."

He nodded approvingly. "Very well."

Buoyed by the unspoken compliment, Lars continued with more confidence. “We’re carrying thirty-two hundred TEU this leg. Nothing new flagged at customs, but they’re still stressing about those two high-security containers we loaded back in Vostochnyy Port.”

Located at the eastern end of the Trans-Siberian Railway in Nakhodka Bay, Vostochnyy Port was the largest in the Russian Far East and had been their most northern stop on the journey. The containers they had loaded there were bound for Jakarta and listed on the manifest as containing “specialty medical isotopes and industrial equipment.” But Arjun had been in the shipping business long enough to know that when something didn’t smell right, it probably wasn’t.

“Same drill as before,” Arjun said. “They’ll remain sealed below deck, and we’ll check their integrity each day.”

“Aye aye, sir,” the chief mate replied.

“Anything else?”

“The crew is steady, no changes. Engineering wants us to keep an eye on the vibration in the port shaft. They say it hasn’t worsened, but it’s still there.”

Arjun set his cup down and turned to Lars. “That’s it?”

“They signed off the same as always, ‘Safe passage, captain.’”

“Very well,” Arjun replied. “You have the watch. I’m going to walk the decks.”

“Aye aye, captain.”

Arjun finished the last of his coffee and left the bridge, clutching the leather-bound logbook that he often used to note details of each sailing that went beyond official entries. More than a few had been made since taking on the two containers in Vostochnyy Port. He couldn’t put a finger on it, but something about that cargo bothered him.

Arjun descended from the Bridge past the Captain's and Officer's Decks but lingered on the Crew Deck. Like sailing ships of old, it was in the mess hall where rumors swirled, and an intelligent and observant captain could gauge the barometer of his crew's morale. Their sailing hadn't been incredibly long, and they had just enjoyed a brief port call on Guam, but Arjun was nothing if not a creature of habit. He smoked a single clove cigarette when leaving or entering a harbor, often used a paper chart and sextant to verify their position rather than relying solely on modern GPS navigation equipment, and he believed in walking the deck plates and being accessible to his crew.

Arjun walked confidently through the Crew Deck. He had a solid build with a thick salt-and-pepper beard and dark eyes that weighed the condition of his ship and measured his crew without malice. He kept his uniform crisp and expected others to follow suit. Discipline was the foundation from which all other attributes were built upon. Including morale.

"Hey, Cap'n," Mateo Alvarez called out.

Arjun smiled warmly at the Filipino. "How are things, Mateo?"

"Last leg. Couldn't be better."

Mateo—or just Teo to most of the deckhands—was a regular in Arjun's crew. He had grown up in Cebu and had a long history of working on commercial vessels. Starting as a deckhand on small bulk carriers before eventually earning his AB certification, he was energetic and ambitious and enjoyed the hands-on work of the deck.

Most importantly, he had a good grasp on how the rest of the crew was faring.

"Is everybody else—"

His question was cut short by a klaxon shrieking through the mess deck in a harsh, warbling wail that made the steel hull tremble. The surprised expression on Mateo's face was

caught by a flashing red light that was a visual cue meant to accompany the alarm.

Arjun's heart bolted with sudden dread, recognizing the unique pattern of three short blasts and one long that indicated a security threat.

"Go!" he shouted at Mateo. "Report to the Bosun."

Momentarily frozen with fear, the able seaman responded to his captain's command and sprang into action. Arjun watched him disappear through the door, then turned back to the ladder to make for the bridge. They were too close to Guam and too far from the pirate-infested waters off Indonesia for the alarm to be real. But ignoring the alarm wasn't an option.

Fueled by fear, Arjun flew up the ladder with effortless grace and bounded through the chart room onto the bridge.

"Lars!" he shouted. "What is it?"

The Dane turned back to him with wide eyes. "Small craft on the port side, closing fast!"

Arjun recoiled momentarily as if slapped, then dashed for the port bridge wing. He opened the watertight door and stepped out into the fading sunlight. Within seconds, he spotted three black skiffs knifing through the waves and fanning out across his ship's beam. Each carried camouflaged men crouched low with rifles, their faces obscured by masks.

"This can't be," Arjun muttered.

A crack of automatic gunfire sent him scrambling for cover inside the wheelhouse as rounds pinged against the superstructure's metal bulkheads. He fell to his hands and knees but quickly recovered and scrambled back to get another look. The three skiffs had broken formation; two pressed against the ship's beam and another angled toward the stern. Even in the fading sunlight, he caught the glint of metal grappling hooks arcing elegantly upward and clattering against the bulwark, leaving trails of climbing ropes snaking over the side.

“Activate the hoses!”

“But they’re not rigged...”

They were days away from expecting any kind of trouble, and the surprise attack had caught them off guard. Arjun cursed under his breath, then gritted his teeth in silent defiance.

“Helm, twenty degrees starboard!” Arjun barked.

The helmsman spun the wheel, and the great ship leaned reluctantly while throwing up white water that surged against the attacker’s hulls. One skiff staggered in the wake, but the others held course and continued hugging the *Meridian Star* close. Men in dark fatigues braced themselves with climbing gear at the ready.

“Mateo, Inga,” Lars snapped into the radio. “Get your teams to the hose stations now!”

Arjun didn’t have the luxury of admiring his chief mate’s initiative. A second barrage of machine gunfire raked across the decks and appeared aimed to keep his deck crew from activating the hoses as dark figures swarmed up the ship’s weathered side in rapid and practiced movements.

“Petrov, get off a Mayday!” Arjun ordered.

Sofia Petrov, his second mate, was already at the radio console and broadcasting over Channel 16. “Mayday, mayday, mayday. This is container vessel *Meridian Star*, position—”

Her words were cut off as bullets flew through the open bridge door and raked across her body.

Arjun’s mouth hung open in stunned silence. In all his years of riding the world’s oceans, he had never come face to face with anything as sudden and violent as this. He was paralyzed by disbelief, unable to accept that an enemy force had boarded his vessel so quickly and efficiently.

But Lars wasn’t frozen. He spun and raced aft to secure the heavy bridge door just as a

hand grenade sailed through and clattered to the floor, coming to rest against the radar repeater.

“Get—”

Arjun’s warning was cut short as the grenade exploded and showered the wheelhouse with red-hot fragments. The repeater shielded him from the worst of the shrapnel, but the concussive blast still knocked him to the ground.

His ears were ringing as he pushed himself to his feet, but his vision had cleared enough to see through the smoke as several armed men in black masks poured through the bridge door and leveled their weapons on his crew while shouting in a language he didn’t understand.

“What do you—”

His question was met with gunfire that ended the promising career of his chief mate. Arjun stared in horror at the blood pooling underneath the Dane’s body.

“Hands up!” another gunman barked; his command accented but precise.

Arjun complied, slowly raising his hands above his head as the klaxon continued shrieking from the loudspeakers. Beyond the bridge, he could hear isolated gunshots washing across the steel deck as the boarding party finished securing his ship.

But it wasn’t his ship anymore. The *Meridian Star* was theirs.

“On your knees.”

Blood trickled slowly from Arjun’s ears as he glanced left and right to take in the state of his bridge crew.

They’re all gone. All of them.

The gunman stepped forward and gestured with the barrel of his rifle. “On your knees!”

Arjun complied and slowly lowered to the deck.

A second black-clad individual stepped around the first and held out a small tablet to

show Arjun a picture on the screen. “Location,” the newcomer demanded.

Arjun blinked slowly before narrowing his eyes to focus on a picture of two shipping containers. Both were labeled with numbers that conformed with the ISO 6346 standard. And both had the owner code, RZDU.

Razvedka Delo Universal.

Arjun sighed.

His instincts had been right. Those containers they had taken on in Vostochnyy Port had spelled disaster. And neither he, nor his crew, would ever know why.

Chapter One

Federated States of Micronesia

Without a second thought, Jack Ryan, Jr. stepped off the platform and plunged into the warm water. The sea closed in over the top of his head like a coffin lid. One moment, the sunlight burned hot on his broad shoulders. The next, it fractured into shimmering glass as he exhaled, and bubbles shot upward in silver columns that vanished into the glare above.

It wasn't that Jack had an affinity for mathematics or routinely pondered complex algorithms. But as he bled air from his buoyancy compensator device and felt pressure building in his ears, he couldn't stop himself from thinking of a certain Swiss physician whose model would become extremely important in short order. The gradient factors employed a theory regarding nitrogen saturation that, like the water, went way above his head. But that didn't keep him from going over the values he had already calculated. Again.

The water was startlingly clear with visibility stretching nearly a hundred feet in every direction. But that only made the isolation seem worse. Jack felt like he was falling through the

sky, with each release of bubbles carrying him deeper into a silence so complete that it roared in his ears.

Sixty feet down, the colors began to bleed away. First, the reds vanished. Then, the oranges. Until all that was left was a blue-green wash of a world that appeared to live without warmth. To combat the overwhelming feeling of despair, Jack turned on his flashlight and aimed it into the abyss beneath him. But the nothingness seemed to swallow its pale cone of light at the edges.

For as cold as it looked, the water was surprisingly warm at ninety feet down. The absence of an obvious thermocline—where the temperature dropped sharply—was a new experience for Jack, and he clenched his jaw and continued his descent. Even so, he couldn't help but feel as if something vast and unseen was watching him from the darkness below.

He flashed a glance at David Park, who was just beyond his reach. The retired Navy Master Diver's expression was hidden behind his mask, but he caught Jack's glance and flashed him a hand signal with the thumb and index finger pinched together in a circle and the remaining three digits extended.

Are you okay?

Jack repeated the hand signal.

I'm okay.

They continued descending.

At one hundred and fifty feet down, Jack began to make out the ocean floor materializing from the inky darkness. Directly beneath them, just the smudge of a shadow transformed into a black shape with sharp edges rising from the silt. His heart suddenly pounded faster, spurred by an irrational fear that the object was moving and drifting upward to consume them.

But then his light caught its rusted skin, and the ship's steel plating loomed like the flank of a drowned leviathan.

The San Francisco Maru.

Often referred to as the “Million Dollar Wreck,” because of the estimated value of its cargo, the steamship sat upright in two hundred and ten feet of water. It was an iconic shipwreck, and the reason Jack had agreed to take a job on the Pacific island in the first place. It seemed like the perfect way to clear his head.

Only his head didn't seem to agree.

Located just six hundred miles from the U.S. territory of Guam, Chuuk Lagoon was once home to Japan's main naval base and considered the “Gibraltar of the Pacific” by allied forces. But following a three-day aerial assault during Operation Hailstone, forty-five vessels and numerous aircraft plunged into the depths of the lagoon. The *San Francisco Maru* was just one of them.

At one hundred and eighty feet down, Jack adjusted his buoyancy and carefully finned through Holds 1 and 2, taking in the spectacle of tanks, mines, and bombs stacked haphazardly atop one another. If not for *Torakku-tō Kūshū*—the airstrike on Truk Island—the *San Francisco Maru* might have left the 4th Fleet Anchorage east of Eten Island and sailed on to deliver its cargo to another Japanese stronghold.

Jack wondered how that might have changed history.

As Jack contemplated the myriad events that led him there—from a well-placed 500-pound bomb dropped by a TBF Avenger from the USS *Essex* to Lisanne Robertson calling off their engagement—he finned slowly across the wreckage and studied its wounds. He swept his flashlight's beam across a porthole, its glass long gone, and for an instant swore he saw

movement retreating into the dark. His heart bolted, but he steadied his breath. At this depth, panic meant death.

As Jack and Park pushed toward the yawning mouth of the cargo hold, he couldn't shake the feeling that the ship had been waiting for them. Jack kept his hoses tucked in tight and finned just hard enough to float effortlessly inside the submerged behemoth, pivoting and twisting through bars and ducking below hanging lines.

Jack was completely engrossed by the sea life that had adapted to the depth and claimed the ship as its home. But he stopped when Park swept his light's beam across the wreckage in front of him to get his attention. Jack turned to look back and saw the experienced diver twirling a finger in the water.

Time to turn the dive.

They were nearing the end of their bottom time.

Jack nodded his understanding, then reluctantly followed Park, and exited the ship.

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Once outside, Park led them to the guideline and carefully began their ascent inch by agonizing inch. Beckoned by the filtered daylight hundreds of feet above them, it would have been so easy to abandon caution and fin for the surface without slowing.

But Jack knew better than that.

As the water above grew lighter with the promise of air and safety, Jack fought against his instinct to kick for the surface without pause. He knew that if he did, his body would be wracked by a deep and grinding ache, like splinters working their way into every joint.

Jack knew they needed to stop. They needed to stick with their decompression schedule and hover in the darkness for...

One minute at one hundred and twenty... one minute at one hundred and ten...

Jack was an accomplished deep-sea diver and had long since beat back the fear that tried convincing him that the black would swallow him whole if he stopped. He knew the consequences for giving into his fear and patiently waited for his dive computer to signal it was okay to continue to the next stop while continuing to breathe. He knew that if he held his breath, his chest would knife with sudden pain and the air in his lungs would expand like a grenade until the alveoli ruptured and punched bubbles into his bloodstream like microscopic bullets.

Never hold your breath.

Jack looked at Park, who hung in the void, suspended by faith in his dive computer. One minute passed. Then another. The *San Francisco Maru* was already forgotten; nothing more than a memory swallowed by the dark.

They stopped twice more before switching gases, letting their regulators hiss like serpents in the abyss. Jack knew his patience would pay off. His ears crackled as they adjusted to the change in pressure, getting closer to normal with each stop. Six minutes at sixty feet. Seven minutes at fifty. His body released its grip on the nitrogen it had absorbed, dissolving the inert gas into his bloodstream so that it wouldn't be ripped from his tissue and boil under his skin.

Their stops became longer the closer they got to the surface. Ten minutes at forty feet. Fifteen minutes at thirty. Jack exhaled and watched his bubbles wriggle skyward, mocking him with their freedom.

Finally, at twenty feet, Jack switched to his final gas and hovered in filtered daylight for twenty minutes. His body trembled from the mental and physical toll the dive had taken. But he took long, slow breaths and savored the end of another successful dive.

After ten more minutes at ten feet down, Park pointed to his dive computer and gave Jack

a thumbs up.

Ascent complete.

Jack Ryan, Jr. and Doug Park broke the surface in a rush of spray and light. They bobbed in the water next to the dive platform attached to the stern of the Motor Vessel *Pelagia*, a 29-meter liveaboard that offered eight cabins with private bathrooms and accommodations for up to sixteen guests. It had been their home for the last six days; their base of operations as they dove fifteen wrecks in the lagoon, including the cargo ship *Yamagiri Maru*, the destroyer *Fumizuki*, and a Kaidai-class submarine, the *I-169*.

Jack tapped the top of his head and made an exaggerated “OK” hand signal to confirm he was conscious and had successfully beat back the depth that begged to bury him. Park repeated the signal to the dive master on the boat, then removed his regulator and let a broad smile stretch across his face.

“She’s something else, ain’t she?” Park said.

“Sure is,” Jack replied. “I only wish we could have stayed on the bottom longer.”

Park didn’t argue and finned his way to the dive platform to exit the water. As Jack patiently waited his turn to doff his gear and scramble aboard the vessel, he couldn’t help but reflect on the opportunities his job as a senior analyst and venture capitalist with Hendley Associates had given him. He’d come a long way from the naive and brash Georgetown graduate who once cornered Senator Gerry Hendley in his office in West Odenton, Maryland and badgered him into a job offer.

Back then, Jack had been long on confidence and short on experience. But the senator knew his pedigree. His father, John Patrick Ryan, had been “one of the best spooks who ever lived,” according to Hendley. But, more than that, he was the reason Hendley Associates existed

in the first place. The senator had taken a chance on young Jack, and that was all the motivation Junior needed.

Park extended a hand and helped Jack into the boat. "I'd say that was a pretty good way of ending your vacation. Wouldn't you?"

It's not a vacation, Jack thought.

But he nodded in agreement. "It's one I won't soon forget. That's for sure."

"Come on, let's clean up and get some chow."

Jack's stomach growled as he glanced back down at the water and wondered what other secrets he might find hidden in its depths.